



California State University, San Bernardino
CSUSB ScholarWorks

Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations

Office of Graduate Studies

6-2019

FOSTER YOUTHS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SOCIAL WORKER'S ROLE IN THEIR PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

Elisa Elvira Sequeira Delgado

California State University - San Bernardino, seque302@coyote.csusb.edu

Anedia Suarez Arroyo

California State University - San Bernardino, 005296235@coyote.csusb.edu

Follow this and additional works at: <https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd>



Part of the [Social Work Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Sequeira Delgado, Elisa Elvira and Arroyo, Anedia Suarez, "FOSTER YOUTHS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SOCIAL WORKER'S ROLE IN THEIR PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION" (2019). *Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations*. 804.

<https://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu/etd/804>

This Project is brought to you for free and open access by the Office of Graduate Studies at CSUSB ScholarWorks. It has been accepted for inclusion in Electronic Theses, Projects, and Dissertations by an authorized administrator of CSUSB ScholarWorks. For more information, please contact scholarworks@csusb.edu.

FOSTER YOUTHS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SOCIAL WORKER'S ROLE
IN THEIR PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

In Partial Fulfillment
of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Social Work

by
Anedia Suarez Arroyo
Elisa Elvira Sequeira Delgado

June 2019

FOSTER YOUTHS' PERCEPTIONS OF THE SOCIAL WORKER'S ROLE
IN THEIR PURSUIT OF HIGHER EDUCATION

A Project
Presented to the
Faculty of
California State University,
San Bernardino

by
Anedia Suarez Arroyo
Elisa Elvira Sequeira Delgado

June 2019

Approved by:

Deirdre Lanesskog, Faculty Supervisor, Social Work

Janet C. Chang, Research Coordinator

© 2019 Anedia Suarez Arroyo and Elisa Elvira Sequeira Delgado

ABSTRACT

The majority of youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood aspire to achieve a higher education, yet they often face barriers and lack a support system. In the United States, only 50% of foster youth graduate from high school. About 13% of foster youth enter college and only 3% graduate. The purpose of this study is to assess foster youths' perceptions on the social worker's role when pursuing higher education. The literature suggests that child welfare agencies have developed a variety of programs for foster youth and for their social workers aimed at improving foster youth's educational outcomes. Yet, the gap between foster youth's aspirations and achievements persists.

This study used a qualitative design as well as a purposive sampling method. We interviewed 15 foster youth, ages 18-25 from a foster youth program at a four-year university. We asked about their experiences in preparing and pursuing a higher education, particularly their perceptions of their social workers' roles in these experiences.

Our findings suggest that social workers' encouragement, communication about higher education information, and communication about financial aid are all important to foster youth. Our participants recommended a variety of suggestions around ways social workers could facilitate foster youth's access to higher education. Participants shared a range of experiences with social workers related to encouragement and information about college; some received a great deal of information and support, while others did not. Participants recommended social

workers provide a checklist to discuss the steps required to attend college, encouragement, information about college and financial aid, trainings for social workers to learn more about college resources and share with foster youth, more one-one time to discuss educational options, and social workers to discuss college with foster youth at an early age.

Our findings suggest encouragement and information about higher education and financial aid are highly important and youth do not receive these consistently from social workers. Understanding the role social workers played in the lives of foster youth can help provide more insight into what services can be enhanced or implemented to better prepare foster youth for higher education.

ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

“I would first like to thank Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog for all of your support and guidance. Thank you for reading all of our drafts, your constructive feedback, and for motivating me to continue my education. You gave me that extra push I needed to continue striving towards a Ph.D. Thank you to the foster youth program for allowing us to interview students and learn from their experiences. Thank you students for sharing your stories, we definitely would not have been able to continue this research journey without your input. You are all resilient and bright individuals and I wish you the best in all of your endeavors! Thank you to the Office of Student Research for awarding us a grant for this research project. Thank you Annie for being such a thoughtful and responsible research partner. I wish you the very best! Thank you to my family for motivating me throughout this academic journey. Finally yet importantly, thank you to the entire social work faculty for inspiring me every day.”

–Elisa Sequeira Delgado

First and foremost, I would like to thank Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog. Thank you for your unconditional support and guidance. I will forever be grateful for your commitment to this project, and for your dedication to our overall success. I would like to thank the professors at California State University, San Bernardino School of Social Work for guiding me through both the BSW and MSW programs. Thank you to the foster youth program at the University for helping us in our research project. A special acknowledgment to the students that participated in this research study. Thank you for telling your stories and for giving us a glimpse into your educational experiences. Thank you to my research partner, Elisa. You are a beautiful soul destined for amazing things. Thank you for being a great partner. Lastly, thank you to my closest friends and family for your unconditional love, and for always reaffirming my will when I doubted myself.

-Anedia "Annie" Arroyo

DEDICATION

“I would like to dedicate this to all foster youth, especially those who have not had the opportunity to speak about their experiences. I wish I could have interviewed you all and included your stories in this research project! Continue pursuing your dreams and inspiring the world. You all have a big future ahead of you and are capable of great things! I would also like to dedicate this to my family, thank you for being an amazing support system. Mom, thank you for your abundance amount of love and support. Your motivation has inspired me and guided me every step of the way. I love you and this is for you.”

–Elisa Sequeira Delgado

“To all foster children and youth that persevere through challenging times. Thank you for being an inspiration. Never give up on your goals and do not be afraid to take the risk and dream big.

To my dad, for your sacrifices and for teaching me the value of hard work. To my “little” brother, Ruben, for always believing in me. I hope to one day inspire you as much as you have inspired me. To my husband, Miguel, I appreciate you for all the things you have done and continue to do for me. I do not know what I would have done without your support.

To my mom, Isalia, for making me the strong woman I am today. To my brother, Peter, who always believed in me. Although you are not here physically, I feel your presence and love. I love you and miss you both dearly”.

-Anedia “Annie” Arroyo

TABLE OF CONTENTS

ABSTRACT	iii
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
CHAPTER ONE: INTRODUCTION	1
Problem Statement	1
Policy Context	2
Practice Context.....	3
Purpose of the Study	4
Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice	5
CHAPTER TWO: LITERATURE REVIEW.....	8
Introduction	8
Programs for Foster Youth.....	8
Programs for Social Workers	13
Social Worker's Role and Foster Youth Outcome	15
Theories Guiding Conceptualization	16
Summary	19
CHAPTER THREE: METHODS	20
Introduction	20
Study Design	20
Sampling.....	22
Data Collection and Instruments.....	22
Procedures	23
Protection of Human Subjects	24

Data Analysis	25
Summary	25
CHAPTER FOUR: RESULTS	26
Introduction	26
Participants	26
Themes	27
Social Worker’s Encouragement	27
Communication About Higher Education Information.....	32
Communication About Financial Information.....	34
Participants’ Recomendations for Increasing Access to Higher Education	36
Summary	41
CHAPTER FIVE: DISCUSSION	42
Introduction	42
Discussion	42
Limitations.....	44
Strengths	45
Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research	45
Social Work Practice	46
Policy	48
Research.....	48
Conclusion	50
APPENDIX A: INTERVIEW QUESTIONS DEVELOPED BY THE RESEARCHERS	51
APPENDIX B: INFORMED CONSENT	54

REFERENCES	57
ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES	60

CHAPTER ONE

INTRODUCTION

Children and teens enter the foster care system when they have been removed from the custody of their parents or guardians for the purpose of preventing future abuse or neglect. Foster care is a temporary arrangement in which children are placed with either their relatives or non-relatives.

Unfortunately, the majority of children in the foster care system have experienced some form of neglect, abuse, and/or trauma, which can impact their overall well-being and educational success. As a result, foster youth have an alarming high school dropout rate and low college graduation rate. Identifying the perceptions of foster youth in regards to the impact social workers have on their educational success may help improve support services and address the gap between foster youth and higher education.

Problem Statement

In 2016, there were an estimated 437,465 children in foster care and 20,532 aged-out of the foster care system (United States Department of Health and Human Services, 2016). Although the majority of youth transitioning from foster care to adulthood aspire to achieve a higher education, they often face barriers and lack a support system (Salazar, Roe, Ullrich, & Haggerty, 2016). The difficult experiences foster youth face throughout their childhood also make them vulnerable to mental health problems, homelessness, unemployment, and

poverty (Salazar et al., 2016). All of these factors can create barriers and challenges for foster youth as they pursue their educational aspirations.

Policy Context

Over the past 2 decades, there have been increasing efforts for federal legislation that promotes funding for foster youth to pursue an education (Okpych, 2012). In 1986, Congress approved the Independent Living Initiative that provided \$70 million to states to implement Independent Living Programs (ILP) for foster youth ages 16-21 (Okpych, 2012). The mission of ILP is to promote education, employment opportunities, permanent connections through supportive mentoring relationships, extended medical benefits until age 21, and resources to help foster youth reach self-sufficiency and independence (Riverside County, n.d.). Despite the federal policies and programs foster youth continue to have a low high school and college graduation rate. Only 50% of foster youth in the United States graduate from high school (National Foster Youth Institute, n.d.). Foster youth in high school have the highest high school dropout rate and the lowest graduation rate among all ethnic and socio-economic student groups (Kinarsky, 2017). Even though, most foster youth aspire to obtain a college degree nationally about 13% of foster youth enter college and only 3% graduate (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013).

Although, the gap between foster youth and higher education remains there have been attempts to address the needs of foster youth. For example, Extended Foster Care (EFC) is another federal initiative program that offers

benefits like foster care placement or supervised independent living placement (shared living, apartment, foster home, college dorm), medical and dental, independent living program services, life skills, clothing allowance, case management, and referrals to community resources (California Department of Social Services, 2012). To be eligible for EFC, foster youth must be eighteen years of age. They must work or volunteer at least 80 hours a month, or participate in a program that offers skills, be enrolled in school such as high school or an equivalent program, college or community college, or a vocational program (California Department of Social Services, 2012).

Practice Context

For foster youth, getting to college can be challenging, especially due to a lack of support system and encouragement from others to pursue an education (Kinarsky, 2017). When former foster youth exited the foster care system, they stated that they often sought support from an adult when attempting to enter vocational training or postsecondary education (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013). Currently, child welfare agencies have ILP in which social workers provide support services to foster youth. Although, the ILP is designed to help foster youth transition into adulthood, they are only eligible for this program until they turn 21 (California Department of Social Services, n.d.). Foster youth may require further assistance after the age of 21 because they may lack an understanding of life skills and may be academically behind. Perhaps, this is due to the unstable living environment and lack of mentoring relationships they had throughout their

childhood. Therefore, child welfare agencies could increase the age limit of the ILP for foster youth, ask for foster youth's input about ILP services, and have social workers thoroughly assess their educational needs to help increase support and access to higher education.

Purpose of the Study

The purpose of this study is to assess foster youths' perceptions on the social worker's role when pursuing higher education. This study will provide information on the role that social workers played in the lives of foster youth who pursued higher education. It will further explore if foster youth attending college received any type of information or resources about post-secondary education from their social workers. The study will also assess if they received any support from their social workers about pursuing a higher education. Understanding the impact that social workers have on foster youth may provide more insight into what services and resources can help them better prepare for post-secondary education. For example, most foster youths are eager to leave the foster care system once they turn 18 years old, but they do not always have the resources or skills to live independently (Katz & Courtney, 2015). When evaluating the unmet needs of foster youth, Katz and Courtney found that approximately 35% of 17-year-old foster youth stated that they had unmet needs, about 28% at age 21 and 36% at age 23 (2015). Their study also found that majority of the foster youth reported a lack of financial stability and did not feel prepared for life after foster care (Katz & Courtney, 2015). Therefore, this study will assess the extent to

which foster youth felt supported and prepared by their social worker in regards to their educational future, as well as youths' suggestions for the roles their social worker might play.

The research method this study will use is a qualitative design. The study will employ one-on-one, face-to-face and phone interviews with participants using an open-ended questionnaire design. This research design was selected since the study focused on collecting data based on perceptions and experiences. Additionally, this type of research design was selected due to the study's limited time frame. Qualitative analysis helps describe the major patterns or themes that may emerge from the data. Furthermore, the design selected will assist researchers in identifying any relationships between themes. During the interviews, researchers are also able to document notes in a journal about what may transpire during the interviews with participants, this includes the ability to record their body language.

Significance of the Project for Social Work Practice

There is little research exploring the role of social workers, if any, in the foster youths' pursuit of higher education. Higher levels of education enhance the perceptions of foster youth life skills, promotes resilience and stability, gives them access to meaningful jobs or careers, and it decreases their likelihood of incarceration and homelessness (Day et al., 2011). For this reason, it is important that foster youth have the same access to higher education as other youth. In addition, learning about the journey of foster youth as they pursue an

education can provide insight into what barriers they may have faced, and social workers enhance their services delivery.

Our research will explore how foster youth gained information about higher education, what support services they were offered, if any, whether their social worker played a role in their pursuit of an education, and what support they would have wanted from their social worker. It is important to further explore this problem to understand if certain changes need to be made within social work practice or in child welfare services. This research project will address the assessment stage of the Generalist Intervention Model by gathering data about the gap between foster youth's perception and social worker's role. The information that is collected from the research project can be used for the planning stage of the Generalist Intervention Model by formulating recommendations so that services can be enhanced and better assist foster youth.

The findings of this study will help social workers better understand foster youth's perspective on their educational needs. It will also explore if social workers encourage and support higher education among foster youth. Foster youths' input can potentially lead to the most appropriate practice interventions that could enhance social worker practice by strengthening their collaboration with foster youth. This study can contribute towards policy by incorporating the needs of foster youth into federal initiative programs. This study can also contribute towards research by gathering information on foster youth's

perceptions on their experiences towards pursuing a higher education and what services can be improved. Ultimately, the research findings can potentially address the challenges foster youth face while pursuing an education through improving services that can enhance their access towards an education. Our research question will focus on, what are the perceptions of foster youth in regards to the role of social workers in their pursuit towards higher education?

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

Introduction

This chapter discusses the literature review related to foster youth educational needs and the impact of social workers on their educational success. The chapter will focus on three areas which are: programs for foster youth, programs for social workers, and social worker's role and foster youth outcome. The theories guiding conceptualization are Systems Theory and Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Theory.

Programs for Foster Youth

Bruster and Coccoma (2013) evaluated a mentoring project focused on increasing foster youth awareness about higher education. The purpose of this program was to address the lack of post-high school educational success among ILP foster youth (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013). This was a 2-year longitudinal study and the youth were given a survey before and after the mentoring activities. There were two separate cohorts, the first had four foster youth and the second cohort had six youth. There were 17 social work students that served as mentors. The youth participated in activities alongside the mentors and were exposed to campus services at the University of Florida. The youth learned about college and career opportunities after graduating high school (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013). The findings were that mentoring programs helped youth plan and reinforce their thoughts about college (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013). A limitation

was that there was a lack of male mentors, which may have limited the number of male foster youth in the program (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013). This study emphasized the positive impact a support system had among foster youth in regards to higher education as they transition out of care.

Greeson and colleagues (2014) evaluated a program to identify if it helped increase social support for foster youth. The study consisted of 203 foster youth and used a random assignment process (Greeson, Garcia, Kim, & Courtney, 2014). The 203 foster youth were separated into two separate groups: 100 foster youth were placed in an intervention outreach program and 103 foster youth were placed in a control group where the services were the same as usual. The outreach worker helped motivate the youth to achieve their goals. The authors found that there was a difference in the levels of social support between the baseline and the second follow-up; however, there was not an increase in the outreach group compared to the control group (Greeson et al., 2014). A limitation was that the foster youth chosen for this study did not include youth in non-treatment foster homes or group homes. This study had conflicting findings because although the majority of youth reported an increase in social support, when the results were compared to the control group there was no significant difference. They suggested that more research be done in the social work field to examine the impact of outreach support among foster youth (Greeson et al., 2014).

Mulkerns and Owen (2008) addressed identity development among 12 emancipated adults after foster care. They found that former foster youth felt alone, lacked support after exiting the foster care system and wished they had support from someone, and that the emancipation process affected their sense of identity. Although, the sample was diverse in race, ethnicity, gender, and education, a limitation was that the participants were connected to social services programs, which could increase their likelihood of seeking assistance. The study also addressed Erikson's developmental theory and how a lack of support among former foster youth can impact their development and ability to form relationships with others because of the difficult experiences and lack of support they have experienced throughout their lives (Mulkerns & Owen, 2008).

Martin and Jackson (2002) found that most children and youth in foster care do not do well in school or are expected to perform below average. However, foster youth that receive adequate and supportive care, tend to do better in school and are more likely to pursue a higher education than foster youth that do not. To understand more about the educational difficulties that foster youth face, the authors interviewed 12 men and 26 women that spent at least one year in residential or foster care. To gather detailed information about their educational success, the authors conducted a qualitative study that asked open-ended questions about the participant's family, care, school, higher education, career experiences and suggestions for what could enhance the outcomes for foster youth (Martin & Jackson, 2002). The participants' responses

greatly focused on the experiences of children and youth in the foster care system. Their responses stressed the importance of “normalizing” the status of foster care students in schools, the importance of having support from teachers and school staff, involving foster care students in extracurricular activities to encourage development and social skills, motivation and support from caregivers, and improving communication and collaboration with social workers (Martin & Jackson, 2002).

Geiger and colleagues (2018) conducted an exploratory study to identify the characteristics of programs that support foster care students and the challenges foster youth may face when pursuing a higher education. The study builds on previous work about the campus-based programs that support foster youth and their importance. They used an online survey with participants in different states. The online survey was sent out to practitioners associated with campus-based programs or that were involved with the foster care system. Participants were asked several questions about their role with the program they were involved with, details about the program and its location, as well as the perceived challenges associated with the program and with student experiences (Geiger et al., 2018). The study found that foster care youth needed additional resources and support, such as financial aid and wraparound student support services that could help them achieve higher education. The study also emphasized that programs should be available to foster youth before and during their college experience to help guide them and provide them with support.

Day and colleagues (2011) examined if foster youth were more likely to drop out of college than low-income, first generation students that were not involved with the foster care system. The study focused solely on the retention of post education for foster youth who were attending a four-year university. The sample compared the experiences of two undergraduate groups enrolled at Michigan State University (MSU). One of the groups identified themselves as “wards of the court” and the comparison group identified themselves as low-income, first generation students with no involvement in the foster care system (Day et al., 2011). The study found that students who were in foster care were significantly more likely to drop out of college before the end of their first school year and prior to degree completion than low-income, first generation students who had not been in foster care (Day et al., 2011). The findings emphasize the importance of collaboration between child welfare services and the education system to promote and support higher education for foster youth. They also suggest the creation of more campus-based programs that provide foster youth students with services and resources for their academic success.

Kirk and Day (2011) discussed the importance of helping foster youth attain higher education. They recognized the challenges that many foster youths faced when transitioning out of the foster care system, which included lack of familial and community support, lack of financial resources, a place to live, and limited education, training and employment options. These challenges place youth in vulnerable situations that can potentially have negative and impactful

outcomes, such as poverty, homelessness, unemployment, involvement with the criminal justice department, teen pregnancy and parenthood. The authors evaluated a higher education program developed in the state of Michigan and led by the School of Social Work at Michigan State University to enhance the knowledge and information about college life and the admission process. Kirk and Day found that education programs do help foster youths achieve their goals of pursuing a higher education. The programs offered peer support, role modeling, mentoring and active learning sessions, and information about college life. The curriculum also enhanced foster youth's life skills, self-concept, resilience, and offered a sense of empowerment and purpose (Kirk & Day, 2011).

Programs for Social Workers

Zetlin, Weinberg, and Kimm (2005) evaluated an 18-month intervention program of social workers' effectiveness in increasing the educational needs of foster children. Prior to the program social workers were assessed on their knowledge of how school systems operate and their ability to report foster youth educational needs (Zetlin et al., 2005). After the intervention program, social workers who received training indicated an increased awareness about the school system and were more likely to address the schooling needs of foster youth (Zetlin et al., 2005). Although social workers demonstrated an increased awareness about school policies and the educational needs of foster youth, their involvement remained unchanged and they were unlikely to refer them to services. A limitation in this study was that the case files referenced in the

beginning of the study, to learn about the social workers' knowledge on the educational needs of foster youth, were not the same case files that were analyzed during the 18-month program, because child welfare agencies attempt to limit the amount of open cases. As a result, the case files previously reviewed were no longer active after 18-months (Zetlin et al., 2005). Overall, this study demonstrated the need for a supportive partnership between social workers and foster youth to ensure that their educational needs are met.

Salazar and colleagues (2016) analyzed recommendations from community stakeholders in creating an intervention to assist foster youth transitioning from foster care. Their study included a total of 37 participants and 27 of those participants worked in child welfare Independent Living Program (ILP), higher education, and nonprofits focused on researching the experiences of foster youth (Salazar et al., 2016). The study focused on 4 categories: (1) recommendations for developing the intervention, (2) recommendations for an educational advocacy intervention, (3) recommendations for a mentoring intervention, and (4) recommendations for a substance abuse prevention intervention (Salazar et al., 2016). Three conclusions from this study could help promote postsecondary access and retention for transitioning foster youth. The first was the importance of building a consistent relationship between the professional and foster youth to provide a range of resources. The second was to develop interventions to help the youth by collaboratively working with them. The third was to address sensitive topics that may affect their educational goals.

These findings demonstrated that there was a lack of support and knowledge among professionals when helping foster youth pursue academic goals. A limitation from this study was that due to the limited amount of time and budget to conduct this research, youth and professionals were combined in the same focus groups (Salazar et al., 2016). This interview method may influence the responses of participants because they are in the same group. However, additional research can help determine whether having youth and professionals in the same groups may or may not have affected their responses.

Social Worker's Role and Foster Youth Outcome

Lindahl and Bruhn (2018) addressed how the social worker's role was related to the outcomes of foster youth in Sweden. They reported that some social workers failed to follow up with placements adequately and constructively, which in turn affected their relationships with foster youth. The study explored social workers' central concepts like sub-roles, dilemmas, professionalism, and functional specificity. The study consisted of qualitative material from individual interviews with social workers from a previous evaluation of a national pilot project, and responses from two focus groups with social workers and youth in foster care. It was found that the relationship between social workers and foster youth is greatly affected by the social worker's heavy workload and the agency's staff turnover (Lindahl & Bruhn, 2018). Even though the social work profession stresses on the importance of maintaining a relational relationship with clients, the burden of heavy caseloads and paperwork often make the task difficult for

social workers to achieve. Overall, the findings of this study suggested that the relationship between foster youth and social workers can be greatly affected by the social worker's formality, limited effort, lack of time and support from the agency's management. Although the study interviewed social workers and foster youth from Sweden, the findings can also be related to social work practice in other countries.

Theories Guiding Conceptualization

The theoretical perspectives used for this research project are Erikson's Psychosocial Developmental Theory and Systems Theory. Erikson's psychosocial developmental theory provides insight into the eight developing stages an individual goes through from infancy to late adulthood (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). For example, during the first stage of Erikson's psychosocial theory an individual learns trust vs. mistrust (infant-18 months). When an infant is placed in foster care, due to abusive or neglectful experiences, their developmental stages can be delayed. If a child has a caring and nurturing attachment with one person, they are more likely to feel supported and motivated. However, if they lack this attachment they may mistrust and distance themselves from others. This can continue to impact them as they become adults and their ability to communicate with others when attempting to reach their milestones. During the identity vs. role confusion stage (13-21 years) stage, youth begin to explore their identity and if they develop a strong sense of self, they tend to have successful social interactions and relationships (Zastrow &

Kirst-Ashman, 2016). Therefore, Erikson's theory can help us learn more about the development of foster youth and how their previous experiences may continue to impact their thoughts and behaviors as they enter other developmental stages. This theory will also help us understand where our participants may be coming from and whether social workers played a role in their lives as they pursued a college education.

To better understand systems theory several components must be defined, which include system, boundaries, subsystem, homeostasis, role, relationship, input, output, feedback, interface, differentiation, entropy, negative entropy, and equifinality (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). A system can be defined as set of elements that are interrelated and arranged to make a functional whole (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). For example, a family is considered a system and so is the agency of Child Welfare Services. In systems, boundaries must also be defined. They establish the individual's role and they create a separation between entities (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016). Subsystems are also part of the larger system, for example, parental and sibling subsystems within a family, and the social workers' subsystems within the child welfare agency.

Homeostasis is the balance that a system strives to maintain. A change in the system or subsystem can disrupt the balance. Roles are socially and/or culturally constructed, and they establish how each individual in the system should behave. A relationship is a connection characterized by patterns of

emotional exchange, communication, and behavioral interaction. Input involves the energy, information, and communication received from other systems, and output is the response of the system after receiving and processing the input. Feedback is the information a system receives about their performance, and positive feedback is the information that the system receives about what it is doing correctly. Interface is the point in which two systems communicate with each other. Differentiation is defined as the process in which two systems change paths due to the new experiences and different options they may encounter. Entropy is the progression of a system towards disorganization, depletion and death while, negative entropy is the growth and development that a system goes through. Lastly, equifinality means that an outcome can be reached through different developmental paths depending on the circumstances (Zastrow & Kirst-Ashman, 2016).

Systems theory can help us understand the individual's interaction within their environment, and how different systems influence one another. Each component defined above plays an important role in the foster youth's development and outcomes. For example, in our research, we will be focusing on the foster youth's interaction with the education system and their interaction with social workers as they pursue higher education. Systems theory may also help us explore and give us a better understanding about human behaviors and how they may be impacted by their interactions with different systems. For example, foster youth are more likely to change social workers, schools and placement,

which then affects their equilibrium and stability. The lack of stability and support may affect their relationships with these systems and their pursuit to a higher education.

Summary

Foster youth are in need of support programs that can provide them with support and assist them on their educational needs and aspirations. Programs created for social workers demonstrate that services can be enhanced to help increase positive educational outcomes for foster youth. If social workers play a supportive role in the lives of foster youth they could make a positive impact on their educational success.

CHAPTER THREE

METHODS

Introduction

This study examined current and former foster youths' perceptions on the social worker's role in their pursuit of higher education. This chapter addressed the methods used to conduct this study. The section included in the chapter are study design, sampling, data collection and instruments, procedures, protection of human subjects, and data analysis.

Study Design

The purpose of this study was to examine current and former foster youths' perceptions on the social worker's role in their pursuit of higher education. This study evaluated the perceptions of foster youth for the purpose of understanding the extent to which social workers played a role in their pursuit of higher education. Gaining insight in this area helped improve and promote services to better assist foster youth in school and help guide them as they transition into adulthood. This study provided foster youth with the opportunity to express their experiences and contribute towards the educational success of future generations. The research question for this study was, what are the perceptions of foster youth in regards to the role of social workers in their pursuit towards higher education? It is possible that there is a gap between foster youth and higher education and perhaps they did not receive the support they would

have wanted as they pursued higher education. The reason for conducting this study was to learn if social workers played a role in helping prevent foster youth's low graduation rates and lack of support system.

This study used a qualitative design for collecting data. We used a face-to-face and phone interview guided approach. Using a qualitative approach gave participants the opportunity to express themselves by sharing their personal experiences, instead of being limited to choosing specific answers. Participants were asked questions in a sequenced manner. These questions addressed foster youths' experiences in pursuing a higher education and whether they received assistance from social workers throughout the process. These questions were structured in an open-ended manner to give participants the opportunity to share more information. Open-ended questions helped assess and interpret the responses of the participants. We asked participants the same questions to analyze their responses equally and avoid interviewer bias.

Using a qualitative approach created limitations because it may have caused participants to feel obligated to expand on specific questions. To avoid this from occurring we provided them with an informed consent form, which explained the purpose of the study, confidentiality, risks and benefits. We guided participants through the consent form and ensured that they understood the information. Participants were informed that they could stop or refuse to answer any question at any time. We also used an empathetic approach with participants to help create a safe and welcoming environment. Another limitation is that this

was a small group of participants and does not represent all foster youths' perceptions of social workers. Although, there were not many participants in this study their experiences and feedback helped provide insight. Each participant's journey towards higher education is unique and their participation in this study helped increase more awareness on the barriers they have encountered to enhance their opportunities towards educational success.

Sampling

This study used purposive sampling in which we recruited participants from a foster youth program at a four-year university. The sampling criteria included current and former foster youth, enrolled or graduates of a four-year University. No other sampling criteria was used. We interviewed 15 participants. Participants were from different ethnic backgrounds, including Native American, White, Hispanic, and White. There was 1 male and 14 females, and their ages ranged from eighteen to twenty-five. Before we interviewed participants, they were contacted to schedule a convenient time to meet. When we scheduled interviews, we were mindful that participants may have jobs, classes, and other priorities. We informed participants in advance that the interview would take about 20-30 minutes.

Data Collection and Instruments

The study was conducted through face-to-face and phone interviews using an interview guide. Participants were asked demographic questions including

age, gender, ethnicity, completed education, and educational goals. After the demographic questions participants were asked 9 interview questions (Appendix A). These questions were designed to encourage participants to elaborate on their experiences and to solicit comprehensive information from their responses. The interview questions included their chosen major and career interest; challenges they experienced while pursuing a college education; whether they were provided information from their social worker pertaining to higher education; if their social worker encouraged them to pursue a higher education; what kind of support services their social worker offered them, if any; what kind of support they would have wanted from their social worker; and what recommendations would they offer social workers to help increase foster youth access to higher education.

Procedures

We sought permission to conduct research on foster youth participants from a foster youth program at a four-year university. We collaborated with the director of the program who agreed to facilitate recruitment. We provided the coordinator from the foster youth program with a research project flyer and she informed foster youth students about the study. Participants emailed us to learn more about the study and to schedule a time and place to meet for an interview. Researchers administered the interviews at the university and over the phone based on the participant's availability. Before the interview, participants were provided with an IRB approved, informed consent form. Upon completion of the

interview, participants received a \$25 Visa gift card incentive for their participation. Data collection took place during January 2019-March 2019. Towards the end of each interview, participants were thanked and informed that the study's findings would be available for review in September 2019.

Protection of Human Subjects

Participants were interviewed on a voluntary basis and they were informed that they could refuse to answer any question or stop the interview at any time. Participants that wished to stop the interview will still receive compensation without any consequence. Participants were informed that their decision to participate or not to participate would not impact any current or future services they receive from the foster youth program.

The researchers took appropriate measures to ensure the protection and confidentiality of all participants. Personal information of the participants was not be asked nor shared. Participants were informed of the purpose of the study, voluntary participation, risks and benefits, informed consent form, and audio consent form to be audio recorded. Participants were also informed about who was conducting and supervising the study, IRB approval, and compensation for their participation. Participants signed the informed consent form. Participants were not identified by name or any other personal information. Their responses were stored in audio recordings on a computer that were password protected and only the researchers had access to them. Upon the completion of the research, all data including the audio recording was securely destroyed.

Data Analysis

This study utilized qualitative data analysis techniques. The interviews were audio-recorded and handwritten notes were taken by the researchers as needed during the interviews. The data gathered from the interviews on audio tape was transcribed by a professional transcription company. Audio recording the interviews helped ensure the accuracy of the data. When the data was transcribed the researchers analyzed the data by using a thematic analysis technique. We reviewed the transcripts individually and then together, using open coding to identify categories which we grouped into themes. We continued coding each transcript individually, then together, identifying and revising categories with each transcript. We used axial coding to group these categories into themes, noting how these themes related to one another.

Summary

In summary, this chapter presented the methodology that was used for the purpose of this study. This study used a qualitative design as well as a purposive sampling method. The interviews were scheduled based on the participants' availability and were conducted using an interview guide. Also discussed were the procedures and steps that the researchers took to protect the confidentiality of the interviewed subjects. Lastly discussed was the data analysis that pertained to this qualitative study.

CHAPTER FOUR

RESULTS

Introduction

This chapter discusses the findings obtained from interviews conducted during February and March 2019. Fifteen former and current foster youth were interviewed from a foster youth program at a four-year University to explore their perceptions about their social worker's role in pursuing higher education. This chapter describes the participants' demographic characteristics and then describes the themes generated by the data.

Participants

The study included a convenience sample of 15 current and former foster youth between the ages of 18-25. There was one male and 14 female participants. Participants were asked about their ethnicity/race; seven participants identified themselves Hispanic, four White, two African American, one Native American, and one as other. All participants reported receiving their high school diploma. Six participants completed some college, five completed a bachelor's degree, two completed an associate degree, and two completed a high school degree. Eight participants reported planning to obtain a master's degree, three planned to obtain a doctorate, two planned to obtain a bachelor's degree, one planned to obtain either a master's or doctoral degree, and one planned to obtain a Licensed Clinical Social Worker (LCSW) certification.

Themes

Four themes emerged from our analysis of the data. These themes are presented in the following sections: the importance of social worker encouragement, communication about higher education information, communication about financial aid, and participants' recommendations for increasing foster youth access to higher education.

Social Worker's Encouragement

When asked if a current or former social worker encouraged them to prepare for college, six out of 15 participants reported that they did receive encouragement from their direct social worker. These participants provided narratives that reflected the encouragement and support they received from a social worker.

One participant described that her social worker was very helpful and always encouraged her to pursue higher education. The participant reported that after discussing her educational goals with her social worker, her social worker wrote a reference letter to help her meet the requirements of the master's program.

Yeah. I think, yeah, she did. She thought it would be a good idea and then I told her about my master's degree, and I think actually [she] wrote a reference letter for me for my master's degree (Interviewee 6).

Another participant narrated always feeling motivated and encouraged by her social worker. The participant felt that her social worker acknowledged her

potential and her capabilities, and also provided her with the necessary support to continue with her educational goals.

Yes. My former social worker, she always encouraged me to stay on top of my schooling and all that, because she just saw potential in me, I guess, and she didn't want to see me give up on anything or any dreams I had (Interviewee 7).

A different participant related that the several social workers played an important role in her life. She reported that the social workers had a positive impact in her pursuit to higher education because they discussed the importance of education. She reported that the encouragement that she received from them mentally prepared her to stay focused.

I would say my social workers, they had a big impact in my life, just because they've always told me that education is important. In everyone's life it's important, it can get you somewhere where you wouldn't even imagine you would end up. I feel like they're important (Interviewee 13).

One participant described that her county social worker was encouraging in preparing her for college. She felt that her county social worker highlighted her potential to become successful and gave her positive advice about higher education. She felt that it motivated her to continue with her educational goals. On the other hand, her school's social worker did not offer the same encouragement and support.

From the beginning, she [social worker] was like, “You really need to make sure you focus on your classes, because that’s gonna be your ticket to making sure that you have a better life for yourself, that you’re able to support yourself.” She really motivated me and let me know that—I had the potential to do whatever [I] wanted to do...This was my county social worker, but when it came to the social worker that they had in school, they didn’t really help me so much, because I think just being in foster care—what they’re basically worried about is making sure you pass your classes (Interviewee 15).

Two out of the 15 participants reported that they did not receive support or encouragement from their direct social worker but were encouraged by a social worker that they knew through personal connections outside of the department of child protective services. One specific participant narrated that her aunt who happened to be a social worker encouraged her to pursue higher education. She felt that her aunt also provided her with helpful information about the college application process, since she had her master’s degree.

I wasn’t really in contact with my direct social worker because I did get taken by my grandma, so I feel like that communication ended. My other guardian is my aunt, who’s a social worker...she actually played a really big role because she has two master’s, and she is a very educated woman (Interviewee 1).

Another participant received encouragement by different social workers that he met through church and by attending college school events. He narrated that he had meaningful conversations about college options with these specific social workers. The participant felt that the social workers had an interest in his educational goals and provided him with significant advice.

None of those social workers were my specific social workers. There was one social worker, in general, that was in church...every time I went to church, there was always this one social worker, who was also a youth leader, who really just talked to me about college. She would just ask me, am I interested in college? Am I planning on going to college? What colleges do I want to go to? Even questions like that made me really dream big...I could definitely look back now and see that she was one of the main ones who did instill that idea that college is a good thing...I would say that the other social workers that I can think about, is the social workers within the foster youth college program...I just remember being a senior [in high school] and I went to whatever events they had...I met [a social worker] there, and he told me about the program...All that he told me really eased my worries (Interviewee 14).

Although some participants explained that they did receive encouragement and support from a social worker about pursuing higher education, seven out of 15 participants reported that they did not receive encouragement. One participant described that she did not feel encouraged or

prepared by her social worker to pursue a college education. She perceived that due to reunifying with her family, the social worker was not invested in her educational goals.

I didn't have a social worker that prepared me for college. I feel like once the social workers see that the foster child is with family, relatives, that I don't feel like they put much input. They come visit, but they don't really encourage college thinkers...I wasn't pushed to go to college by a social worker (Interviewee 3).

Another participant explained that although she would meet with her social worker, the social worker would not discuss the topic of higher education. The participant narrated that her social worker was interested in her well-being but hoped that she would have also offered her with information and encouragement about education.

I wish she would've talked to me about school because it was just okay, how are you doing? Okay, you're in school. Okay, that's it...I really wish that she would've talked to me about school. I wish she would've given me some information on school (Interviewee 5).

One other participant perceived that her social worker provided her with general information about ILP and Job Corps simply because that was her role. She stated that she did not perceive this information as encouragement, because the information was not based on her educational interests or goals.

She just mentioned the fact of ILP, Job Corps and stuff like that, but those weren't things that I was actually interested in. I think that was more of her – you know, she had to tell former foster youth or current foster youth about those programs...I don't think that she actually told me anything else about college or anything like that or any furthering my education (Interviewee 11).

Communication About Higher Education Information

Participants were asked if they received information or resources from their social worker regarding higher education. Some participants reported they received information on the college application process, foster youth college programs, ILP benefits, and extended foster care (EFC) options.

One participant shared that the biggest form of resource he received from his social worker was support.

He [social worker] eased my worries...I didn't know about the resources. I didn't know how to even apply to college. I remember him breaking down the application process...all the resources that were available. I remember him really just making it sound possible. For me, it was something I didn't know was possible. Resources in general, I would probably say the biggest one was just support. My support system growing up wasn't very big. I didn't have a lot people who believed in me and who supported me. When I found people who did, I really tried to stay close to them (Interviewee 14).

Another participant reported that their social worker provided information on the benefits of participating in the ILP and EFC program. The information the social worker provided directed her to resources for college and provided housing options.

[Social worker] I still have contact with her...she helped with resources and let me know about the foster youth program at a four-year university. My social worker helped me get signed up for the ILP program, and then getting resources like a laptop...same thing when I moved into the dorm rooms, she helped make sure that I had everything that I needed in my dorm room. She always let me know about things...She helped explain to me the benefits of extending [foster care] 'til 21, because I think she was worried that I was going to become homeless (Interviewee 6).

The following participant reported that her social worker did not communicate to her the advantages, options, or information available to her as a foster youth. Therefore, the participant sought help from someone else. Unfortunately, most foster youth that do not receive this information find out about all the services they could have received when they are already in college.

I really didn't know all of the—advantages that were made available to me. I was in foster care and it was never really communicated with me until I got to college already. I really wish that my social worker was able to help me because then I wouldn't have had to turn toward outside help...Maybe just telling me my options? I didn't know that there was help out there for

kids like me. So, it was just the help that I would have liked...just to know my options (Interviewee 9).

Communication About Financial Information

Participants were asked if they received financial information from their social worker regarding higher education. Scholarships was a common theme communicated by social workers among the participants who reported having received information about college. Foster youth who received information about college from their social worker reported having a better understanding of the financial support available to them if they pursued college.

[Social worker] gave me a lot of links to scholarships and she made sure I did applications early and everything early. She made sure I always had my needs taken care of. She gave emotional support and academic support. I think I had a pretty good experience, but I've seen other foster kids they don't have social workers that care at all. Some of them don't even know their social worker, some of them don't see them at all, they just see them about once a month (Interviewee 7).

Another interviewee explained:

They [social workers] helped me prepare, they always asked me what major I was into. They always gave me ideas, always gave me websites, and helped me with scholarships to make sure that I focus in what I want to do and what I love to do. They helped me with the scholarships; they

gave me information within different majors. They would send me links, so I could do research on them (Interviewee 13).

On the other hand, some participants reported that their social worker did not provide them with financial information for college, direction to resources, Chafee grant, and guidance in applying to scholarships and Free Application for Federal Student Aid (FAFSA). As a result, this caused one participant to seek help and support elsewhere, which made her experience applying to college more challenging.

The participant reported she did not receive financial information for college neither directed to resources. A lack of financial information caused her to feel afraid and unsure if she would be able to afford college. The participant also stated that not knowing if you can afford college can discourage people from pursuing an education.

Well, for me, personally, no one told me about the Chafee grant. No one really told me about the financial aid help that I would get if I did continue college...I wasn't sure how much it would be, and I was afraid that I wasn't going to be able to afford it. But when I got into college, they did pay for all my college...That's something I wish a social worker would have gone over with me guided me better. I wished they would have explained all of that, financial aid, because I feel like when you're not sure if you're able to afford it discourages you to continue your education, so you just don't see it as an option (Interviewee 3).

One participant reported that there was a lack of communication with her social worker regarding financial aid and support. The participant believes that she could have benefited from a social worker's guidance and information on resources. She also reports that a lack of information can cause foster youth to give up in pursuing a higher education.

More resources on how you can attain financial aid. How you can attain support. I think transitional information, financial aid resources, housing resources, and someone who's experienced to guide people in that direction...A lot of them (foster youth), they give up because there's no information, there's nothing, there's no help. I would have wanted some support knowing what direction to go. 'Cause I had no information...It would have been nice to be directed on how you attain those resources (Interviewee 4).

Participants' Recommendations for Increasing Access to Higher Education

Participants were asked for recommendations to help increase access for higher education among foster youth. Some participants reported that it would be helpful if social workers provided them with a checklist to discuss the steps required to attend college. Participants recommended for social workers to encourage them and provide them with information about college and financial aid. In addition, participants recommended trainings for social workers to learn more about college resources and to discuss with foster youth. Most participants recommended social workers to provide more one-one time to discuss

educational options and interests. Lastly, participants recommended social workers discuss the option of college with foster youth at an early age.

Participants recommended that a social worker provide them with a checklist to offer more support and guidance towards college. The checklist could help foster youth feel less overwhelmed when preparing and applying to college.

I think the most stressful thing about applying for college is...it's so confusing and there's so many applications, maybe just having someone break it down in steps, like college applications first, FAFSA second, then your book grants...I remember crying to and being like, "I can't. This is too much paperwork. I'm so overwhelmed. I don't know what I qualify for." It was so overwhelming...I would say maybe a checklist. Definitely, that would be my recommendation (Interviewee 1).

Participants recommended more encouragement and information on financial aid from their social workers. Participants stated that social workers' encouraging foster youth and providing them with financial aid information could help them realize that they have options and financial assistance if they choose to pursue an education. Many foster youths are unaware of the services they can benefit from while applying and attending college, due to the lack of communication from their social workers.

Maybe the social workers, should reach out to the fosters, and just encourage them to pursue higher education, inform them there's financial aid, grants that will help them, orientations that they can go to. I think that

would have been more helpful, just encourage it, not push it, just encourage them. Let them know the information (Interviewee 3).

I think educating them (social workers educating foster youth). It seemed like a lot of the youth didn't know about the programs—or grants, like the Chafee Grant. It seems like that is a big help for me going through college. I feel social workers need to know about it and make sure that they're letting the high schoolers know...They get money to pay for the dorms. They don't have to worry about it. They're able to get grants to help pay for school (Interviewee 6).

Some participants recommended that social workers receive more training on college information so that they can discuss it with foster youth as they prepare to attend college. Sometimes, foster youth are unaware of resources that can help them, which can be more challenging for them while they are pursuing a higher education.

I think social workers in general don't even know about a lot of the benefits that are possible for foster youth to go to college. Things of that sort. I think that just because they simply don't know about it—or a lot of them don't know about it—that we don't get the information that could really inspire and really help us to pursue higher education (Interviewee 14).

One participant recommended for social workers to have a prepared file with a variety of resources to assist foster youth in addressing their unique needs and circumstances. She also recommended that social workers encourage foster

youth who have children to pursue an education because she experienced a lack of support from her high school as she prepared to attend college.

I think that I would recommend some sort of training or a prepared file... resources for various situations, whether they're to mom or someone who's trying to get on their feet, or if they don't want to go to college, trade school, or how they can get into a trade to support themselves. Because, when it ends, you're just there with nothing. You don't know what to do. I've seen some other kids struggle there, trying to find an education (Interviewee 4).

Another participant expressed that foster youth need additional support especially when pursuing higher education and recommended for social workers to work one-to-one to better serve them with personalized information about their college options. The participant expressed the importance of providing foster youth with resources during the one-on-one time with the social worker to help them remain informed and prepared for college.

I think just the one-on-one, like a more personalized...especially [for] the people that are just going to graduate. I feel like stepping up and providing those resources and providing the support for people...I know a lot of foster care youth...they're first generation. This is something that's vital for them...If people never know about this information, how do you expect people to go to college? (Interviewee 11).

Most participants highlighted the importance of encouraging and informing foster youth about pursuing a higher education at an earlier age, before attending high school or in the first two years of their high school education. They explained that talking about college at an early age would better prepare foster youth with information about available programs and resources and it would also encourage their educational success.

I think the biggest thing that's important to encourage a foster child who is a junior or senior in [high school] is to start showing them the programs, show them that they're not going to be left alone when they go to college because there's foster youth college programs—designed to help foster youth, to encourage them to keep going. There are people who do care (Interviewee 8).

Further, another participant explained:

I would say start young. It doesn't even matter if they're in elementary school or junior high or even a freshman in high school. It's never too early to start telling them about how they can go to college, the resources that are available to them...Maybe starting to educate them early on. Even hosting fun, interactive college nights where you get to meet people from college, where you get to visit the campus. I know social workers, can put events on like that (Interviewee 15).

Summary

This chapter presented the findings from participants' responses obtained through qualitative interviews. The study explored the experiences of former and current foster youth and if their social worker played a role in them pursuing higher education. The data analysis was presented in the following themes: social workers' encouragement, communication about higher education information, communication about financial aid information, and participants recommendations in increasing foster youth access towards higher education. Some participants shared that they did receive encouragement and information about college from their social workers and others stated that they did not. Participants recommended that social workers provide them with a checklist to discuss the steps required to attend college, more social worker encouragement and support, information on financial aid, trainings for social workers to learn what college information to discuss with foster youth, for social workers to provide one-one time with foster youth to discuss college options, and the importance of discussing higher education with foster youth at an earlier age.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

Introduction

This chapter provides a discussion of the major findings presented in chapter four and relates to existing literature on foster youth pursuit of higher education. Also presented in this chapter are the limitations and strengths of the study, and recommendations for social work practice, policy, and research.

Discussion

The purpose of this study was to examine foster youths' perceptions on the social worker's role when pursuing a higher education. The study found that foster youth perceived that it is important to receive encouragement, support, information and resources about higher education from a mentor or social worker. This is consistent with the literature, which suggests that having a mentor helped foster youth reinforce their thoughts about pursuing a higher education (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013). The youth believed that it helped them with making positive decisions about higher education and career opportunities. Having a supportive relationship with a social worker or mentor can have a positive influence on foster youths' access to higher education, since they are more likely to learn about college services and feel encouraged (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013).

Some participants described that they did receive support and encouragement from a social worker. They reported that their social worker

would communicate that pursuing a higher education could enhance their career options. These participants felt that the social workers acknowledged their potential. However, other participants expressed that social workers often overlooked their educational needs by not discussing them at all. They did not feel encouraged by their social worker to pursue a higher education. Participants reported feeling insecure about attending college due to a lack of communication and support from their social worker. They reported that they did not receive the support they would have liked from their social worker to help them navigate options for college. These findings are consistent with prior research, which highlighted the importance of having a supportive partnership between social workers and foster youth to help ensure that their educational needs are met. For example, Bruster and Coccoma (2013) found in their study that mentoring focused on increasing foster youth awareness about higher education helped youth plan and reinforce their thoughts about college.

When evaluating if foster youth received information about college resources from a social worker, some participants reported that they did receive this type of this information. They indicated having a better understanding about college programs like ILP, EFC, and financial aid. They described feeling prepared about the college enrollment process. However, other participants felt that their social workers had a lack of knowledge about college resources and the services available to foster youth pursuing a higher education, especially when it came to discussing college services like financial aid. They indicated that

they learned about college resources and services when they were already attending college. Participants wished that they had this information before applying to college to explore all of their college options. Participants reported that they would have felt better prepared and more confident about applying to college if their social workers provided them with information. This finding was consistent with previous research, which found that social workers who had knowledge in schooling resources and services were more likely to address the educational needs of foster youth (Zetlin, Weinberg, and Kimm, 2005). Social workers with knowledge and training in educational resources are more likely to advocate for the educational needs of foster youth.

Limitations

Limitations of this study include the small sample size of fifteen former foster youth pursuing a college education at a four-year university and that are part of a foster youth program. The participants of this study may not be representative of all foster youth, as not all foster youth attending the four-year university are part of the foster youth program. Furthermore, this study did not consider foster youth that attend college at other types of schools or in other locations.

Another limitation of this study is the lack of diversity in terms of gender. One participant out of fourteen identified as male. The findings from this participant may not be a representation of the perspectives of male foster youth working with a social worker or pursuing a higher education. Furthermore, some

participants indicated that they worked with a social worker for a short period of time or at a younger age, which may not accurately represent their perspectives of working with a social worker when pursuing a higher education. In addition, participants from this study may have been more motivated to attend college because when entering college, they learned about the foster youth support program and had access to college resources and guidance counselors. This can be a limitation because only foster youth who were in this program were interviewed, as a result we did not include the perspectives of foster youth who were not part of this program.

Another limitation is that this study did not include the perspectives of social workers, specifically the role or impact they had in the lives of foster youth as they pursued higher education. Therefore, there was a lack of insight on social workers perceptions and recommendations on what they think should be implemented to better assist youth in preparing for higher education.

Strengths

Strengths of this study include the diversity of participants related to age. The findings represented some of the participants' experiences of pursuing higher education at different ages. Another strength is that all participants were former foster youth enrolled in college, that were able to share their perspectives of working with social workers while pursuing a higher education. Participants were asked open-ended questions to avoid any leading answers and to avoid the perceptions of the researchers. This qualitative research also allowed

participants to share their personal experiences and to provide more in-depth information about their perceptions.

Recommendations for Social Work Practice, Policy, and Research

This study shares the experiences of current and former foster youth participating in a foster youth program at a four-year university. The findings of this study can offer ideas for improving practice, promoting policy change, and implementing future research to encourage and assist foster youth in pursuing higher education.

Social Work Practice

In the study, foster youth expressed their experiences in preparing and attending college. Some participants stated that they received encouragement and information about college from their social workers. For example, some social workers motivated foster youth to pursue college and provided them with resources for college such as a letter of recommendation for a graduate school, links to scholarships, information about financial aid, and support programs aimed at supporting youth while in college. On the other hand, some foster youth reported that there was a lack of communication with their social worker. As a result, foster youth recommended that social workers dedicate more one-on-one time during their monthly visits to discuss their options and resources that could help in preparing and applying to college. These monthly meetings can provide foster youth with support and help them navigate the college application process.

Social workers play an important role in providing foster youth with college information because foster youth often lack a strong support system that can guide them towards their academic goals. It would be beneficial for social workers to have a conversation with foster youth about college earlier in their life to provide them with information and support, as opposed to during their senior year in high school when time is limited due to college application deadlines. This approach could help foster youth plan their classes for middle school and high school to ensure they meet the necessary requirements for college and that they engage in educational opportunities to learn more about the different options that they have.

Social workers could inform foster youth about opportunities related to campus tours, eligibility on scholarships and grants, careers, and college majors so that the youth are aware of the information and support available to them, which could help them remain motivated in school. Social workers could also provide foster youth with a college resource binder and included a checklist so that the youth are knowledgeable about deadlines and resources. The checklist could include important topics for college such as financial aid, scholarships, grants, college support programs, and housing options. During each visit, the social worker could reference the checklist to see what the youth has learned from the resource binder, what they are interested in, and what they are working on.

Policy

A policy within child welfare agencies can be implemented to promote college awareness and success among children who are in foster care. For example, in each county there can be workshops held every other month. Workshops can be designed for children in elementary, middle school, and high school. Participants can have the opportunity to learn about careers, college majors, listen to motivational guest speakers, which can be former foster youth that are in college, ask questions regarding scholarships or FAFSA. Having former foster youth speak to current foster youth about their experiences could help them relate to their experiences and feel empowered in pursuing a higher education.

The county can assign an employee to help arrange the workshops and perhaps youth from the ILP could assist with the planning and surveys. A survey can be given to participants at the end of the workshop so that they can provide feedback on what they learned and would like to see at the next workshop. These workshops could potentially increase college exposure at an earlier age and address the barriers that foster youth face in academia. College awareness may help increase the number of foster youths who enter college and the 3% of foster youth who graduate nationally from college (Bruster & Coccoma, 2013).

Research

Foster youth are a vulnerable population that typically face many challenging experiences and barriers throughout their lives. Therefore, it is

important that more research be conducted with foster youth to learn about their experiences while preparing and applying to college. Their input can help identify what barriers they are facing or have faced while pursuing a higher education. Interviewing larger diverse groups of foster youth that are in college across the United States can provide insight into a variety of resources that helped them get to college and areas where services can be improved for future generations.

In addition, future research could be directed towards identifying the impact workshops or programs that promote college awareness have on foster youth throughout their educational career. Distributing a survey after foster youth graduate from high school and college can show what types of services made an impact in their lives and can keep track of service outcomes. It would also be beneficial and powerful for foster youth to have the opportunity to contribute their opinions regarding topics that have helped motivate or prepare them for college and for them to be able to see change. For example, research findings could influence the distribution of funding for programs and grants that focus on providing supportive interventions for foster youth and service gaps.

Another area for future research can be social worker's perception about higher education amongst foster youth. The research findings could help demonstrate what knowledge social workers have on the resources available to foster youth that could assist them as they prepare or apply to college. Additionally, social workers could recommend areas they may need more training in to help prepare and encourage foster youth to pursue higher education.

Conclusion

This qualitative study was conducted to evaluate the perspectives of current and former foster youth social worker's role when pursuing a higher education. Our findings suggest encouragement and information about higher education and financial aid are really important and youth do not receive these consistently from social workers. It is important that foster youth continue to have the opportunity to share their concerns regarding higher education service delivery so that the gap between foster youth and higher education is addressed and positive changes can be made to help them achieve their educational goals. It is hoped that this study will help provide knowledge about some of the challenges that foster youth face when working with social workers and the importance of sharing information and resources about higher education.

APPENDIX A
INTERVIEW QUESTIONS
DEVELOPED BY THE RESEARCHERS

Demographic Information Form

Instructions: Please provide a response to the following questions:

1. What is your age?
2. What is your gender?
 - a. Male
 - b. Female
 - c. Non-binary
 - d. Prefer to self-explain:
 - e. Prefer not to say
3. What is your race/ ethnicity?
 - a. White
 - b. Hispanic or Latino
 - c. Black or African American
 - d. Native American or American Indian
 - e. Asian / Pacific Islander
 - f. Other
4. What is your highest level of education completed?
 - a. High school
 - b. Some College
 - c. Associates Degree
 - d. Bachelor's Degree
 - e. Graduate Degree
5. What is the highest level of education you plan on attaining?
 - a. Bachelor's Degree
 - b. Graduate Degree
 - c. Professional Degree

Interview Questions

1. Tell us about yourself as a student.
What is your major, minor, year, etc.
2. Tell us about your career interests?
3. Please tell us about your experiences in deciding and preparing to apply to college?
4. What role did social workers play in preparing you for college?
Did a social worker encourage you to prepare for college?
5. What information/resources did social workers provide?
If not, what kind of information do you think could have helped you?
Did you request this information?
6. Please explain if your former or current social worker encouraged you to pursue a higher education?
7. Who helped you prepare or encouraged you, if not a social worker?
How?
8. What kind of support would you have wanted from your social worker?
What could be improved?
9. What recommendations would you offer social workers to help increase foster youth access to higher education?

APPENDIX B
INFORMED CONSENT

INFORMED CONSENT

The study in which you are asked to participate is designed to examine foster youths' perceptions of social workers' roles in their pursuit of higher education. The study is being conducted by Anedia S. Arroyo and Elisa Sequeira, MSW students under the supervision of Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work, California State University, San Bernardino. The study has been approved by the Institutional Review Board Social Work Sub-Committee, California State University, San Bernardino.

PURPOSE: The purpose of the study is to research foster youths' perceptions of social workers' roles in their pursuit of higher education.

DESCRIPTION: This interview will be audio recorded, transcribed, and analyzed. This interview will consist of 15 questions. The questions will address your experience deciding and applying to college, your perceptions on your former social worker's role in your pursuit of higher education, if you received any information about higher education from your social worker, what type of support (if any) did you receive from your social worker, and what recommendations would you offer social workers to help increase foster youth access to higher education.

PARTICIPATION: Your participation in the study is totally voluntary. You can refuse to participate in the study or discontinue your participation at any time without any consequences.

CONFIDENTIALITY OR ANONYMITY: Your responses will remain confidential. We will not use your name in our findings, only aggregate data. The digital audio files, transcribed interviews, and analysis will be kept on password protected memory drives, and will not contain any identifying information about you. Upon completion of this study, all audio files and identifying information will be securely destroyed.

DURATION: It will take approximately 20 to 30 minutes to complete the interview.

RISKS: There are minimal risks to you in participation to this research such as feeling uncomfortable. If a question causes you to feel uncomfortable, you can refuse to answer the question or stop the entire interview at any time.

BENEFITS: The findings of this research may assist in understanding the perceptions of foster youth in regards to the role social workers play in their pursuit towards higher education. You will be provided with a \$25 gift card for participating in the study.



WE DEFINE THE *Future*

Academic Affairs
College of Social and Behavioral Sciences
School of Social Work

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SAN BERNARDINO
5500 University Parkway, San Bernardino, CA 92407
909.537.5501 | fax: 909.537.7029
<https://csbs.csusb.edu/social-work>

CONTACT: If you have any questions about this study or your rights as a research participant, please feel free to contact Dr. Deirdre Lanesskog, Assistant Professor in the School of Social Work, at 909-537-7222 or dlanesskog@csusb.edu.

RESULTS: Results of the study can be obtained from the Pfau Library ScholarWorks (<http://scholarworks.lib.csusb.edu>) at California State University, San Bernardino after September 2019.

This is to certify that I read the above and I am 18 years or older.

Signature

Date

I agree to be tape recorded: _____ Yes _____ No

California State University, San Bernardino
Social Work Institutional Review Board Sub-Committee
APPROVED 1/18/2020 VOID AFTER 1/18/2020
IRB# SW1904 CHAIR Javerca

REFERENCES

- Bruster, B. E., & Coccoma, P. (2013). Mentoring for educational success: Advancing foster care youth incorporating the core competencies. *Journal of Human Behavior in the Social Environment*, 23(3), 388-399.
doi:10.1080/10911359.2013.764218
- California Department of Social Services (2012). *Independent Living Program*. (2012). Retrieved from: <http://www.cdss.ca.gov/inforesources/FosterCare/Independent-Living-Program> California Department of Social Services.
- Day, A., Dworsky, A., Fogarty, K., & Damashek, A. (2011). An examination of post-secondary retention and graduation among foster care youth enrolled in a four-year university. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(11), 2335-2341.
- Geiger, J. M., Hayes, M. P., Day, A. & Schelbed, L. (2018). A descriptive analysis of programs serving foster care alumni in higher education: Challenges and opportunities. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 85, 287-295.
- Greeson, J. K., Garcia, A. R., Kim, M., & Courtney, M. E. (2014). Foster youth and social support. *Research on Social Work Practice*, 25(3), 349-357.
doi:10.1177/1049731514534900
- Katz, C., Courtney, M. (2015). Evaluating the self-expressed unmet needs of emancipated foster youth over time. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 57, 9-18. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2015.07.016

- Kinarsky, A. R. (2017). Fostering success: Understanding the experience of foster youth undergraduates. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 81, 220-228. doi: 10.1016/j.chidyouth.2017.08.016
- Kirk, R. A, & Day, A. (2011). Increasing college access for youth aging out of foster care: Evaluation of a summer camp program for foster youth transitioning from high school to college. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 33(7), 1173–1180.
- Lindahl, R. & Bruhn, A. (2018). Professional dilemmas and occupational constraints in child welfare workers' relationships with children and youth in foster care. *Children & Youth Services Review*, 88, 333-341. doi: 10.1016/j.chidyouth.2018.03.039
- Martin, P. Y., & Jackson, S. (2002). Educational success for children in public care: advice from a group of high achievers. *Child & Family Social Work*, 7(2), 121-130. doi:10.1046/j.1365-2206.2002.00240.x
- Mulkerns, H., & Owen, C. (2008). Identity development in emancipated young adults following foster care. *Smith College Studies in Social Work*, 78(4), 427-449. doi:10.1080/00377310802378594
- National Foster Youth Institute (n.d.). *Education*. Retrieved October 6, 2018 from, <https://www.nfyi.org/issues/education/>
- Okpych, N. (2012). Policy framework supporting youth aging-out of foster care through college: Review and recommendations. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 34(7), 1390-1396. doi:10.1016/j.chidyouth.2012.02.013

Riverside County Department of Public Social Services. (n.d.). *Independent Living Program*. Retrieved from, <http://dpss.co.riverside.ca.us/childrens-services-division/youth-and-community-resources/independent-living-program>

Salazar, A. M., Roe, S. S., Ullrich, J. S., & Haggerty, K. P. (2016). Professional and youth perspectives on higher education-focused interventions for youth transitioning from foster care. *Children and Youth Services Review*, 64, 23-34. doi:10.1016/j.childyouth.2016.02.027

United States Department of Health and Human Services, (2016). *The AFCARS Report: Preliminary FY 2016 estimates as of October 2017* (24). Retrieved from, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/cb/afcarsreport24.pdf>

Zastrow, C.H. & Kirst-Ashman, K.K. (2016). *Understanding Human Behavior and the Social Environment* (10th ed.). Belmont, CA: Brooks/Cole.

Zetlin, A. G., Weinberg, L. A., & Kimm, C. (2005). Helping social workers address the educational needs of foster children. *Child Abuse & Neglect*, 29(7), 811-823. doi:10.1016/j.chiabu.2004.12.009

ASSIGNED RESPONSIBILITIES

This was a two-person project where authors collaborated throughout. Anedia S.

Arroyo and Elisa Sequeira Delgado collaborated on the following sections:

- Introduction
- Literature Review
- Methods
- Results
- Conclusion

Both Anedia S. Arroyo and Elisa Sequeira Delgado contributed to the formatting, editing, and revisions process throughout the preparation of this paper for submission.